

ICONOSPHERE

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It. *Iconosfera*; Fr. *Iconosphère*; Germ. *Ikonosphäre*; Span. *Iconosfera*. The concept of iconosphere was first introduced by the French philosopher Jean Wahl (1955) in a conference devoted to the cultural problems connected to the diffusion of the mass media. According to Wahl, in the age of mass communication the human being is always surrounded by a double envelope, i.e. "iconosphere" and "phonosphere", which are like "a surrounding forest of noises and images" (Wahl 1955: 335).

In the same years, the French film theorist Gilbert Cohen-Séat (1959, 1961) worked on the notion of iconosphere discussing the historical and epoch-making impact of visual mass media – especially film and television – on the psychology and behaviour of the modern observer. In analogy with the notions of biosphere and noosphere adopted by Teilhard de Chardin, Cohen-Séat defined the iconosphere as a global and enduring existence environment constituted by the visual information spread through the "overwhelming invasion of filmic images" (Cohen-Séat 1961: 26).

According to Cohen-Séat, the iconospheric phenomenon marked a fracture in the modern history of perceiving and experiencing the world, changing the "conditions of presentation and reception of the information" (Cohen-Séat 1959: 10). However, the specific nature of the iconosphere is the result of a quantitative process operating on a global scale and, more importantly, of the qualitative difference of the psychological relationships between filmic images and their public. Furthermore, the pervasiveness of the visual information granted by the new technical media highlights the social dimension of the concept of iconosphere, implying a radical modification of the relations between human beings, the world, and the universe of culture (Eco 1964).

Later on, the Polish art historian and critic Mieczysław Porębski gave a much more general and comprehensive definition of iconosphere in a monographic essay (1972). The iconosphere as defined by Porębski amounts to the whole visual world experienced by the perceiver, both as individual and as collective subject. It is a part of reality and works like a kind of "coating", as in Wahl's definition, but it includes the natural objects of everyday vision (e.g. the starry sky) as well as the man-made pictures and even the inner world of mental imagery, memories, dreams and hallucinations (Porębski 1972: 271).

During the 1960s and 1970s, the notion of iconosphere was frequently used in the fields of film and media studies, mostly referring to the social role played by visual communication in its worldwide ubiquity. Many authors insisted on the consequences induced by the widespread diffusion of visual media in terms of social passivity or, on the contrary, participation, conformism or emancipation, although somehow overlooking the original concern of Cohen-Séat for the deep neuropsychological dimension of the effects produced by images on their beholders or even for their archaic unruly “magical power”. In a markedly pessimistic vein, other authors emphasized the danger of a loss of critical attitudes associated with mass image consumption and the risks of an irreversible decline of the world of the written words (for a typical instance, see Munier 1963), so fuelling a long-lasting debate between “iconophiles” and “iconophobes”.

APPLICATIONS, PERSPECTIVES AND PROBLEMS

More recently, scholars influenced by the broader approach offered by Porębski tried to apply the overgeneralized concept of iconosphere as a methodological resource to specific contextual cases, such as the analysis of urban landscapes, architectural environments (*Chmielewska 2005 and 2007*) or the works of a single artist (Johnson 2009). In this perspective, the iconosphere is not thought in terms of a galaxy of technical pictures spread by media industries or the digital web, but as the visual milieu of a specific place in a specific time, the imagery available to a specific culture, regardless of the particular nature of images involved or their material vehicles. So conceived, the notion of iconosphere comes very close to the concept of visual culture.

It is not surprising that the idea of a visual sphere defining the relationship between the observer, the image and the reality has been resumed and further expanded by the French philosopher Régis Debray (1991) in his attempt to articulate the different phases of an alleged history of human gaze within the history of Western civilization. Such a history would be divided into three main ages by the advent of writing, print and the visual media, corresponding to the three ages of idol (logosphere), art (graphosphere) and the visual (videosphere). More importantly, each age is marked by a specific scopic regime, historically and culturally conditioned. In this way, the concept of iconosphere gains a more explicit historical dimension and each of its different instantiations might be literally understood as a kind of cognitive surrounding world, an *Umwelt* – in Jakob von Uexküll’s sense of the term – whose scope is delimited by spatial, temporal and cultural boundaries.

The underlying assumption, here, is that the perceiving subject is always historically situated, and his/her visual experience and cognition are invariably related to a specific point of view, which is also a more comprehensive worldview. In such terms, iconospheres have always an essentially perspectival nature, and share this feature with other related and coeval notions, such as those of “period eye”, devised by Michael Baxandall, and “scopic regime”, coined by Christian Metz and refined by Martin Jay (see Pinotti and Somaini 2016: 132).

The most relevant epistemological problem of such a historicistic interpretation of the concept of iconosphere (or of other equivalent concepts) is the very idea of situatedness. As Martin Jay has repeatedly

argued discussing the “form of visual life”, “there may never be an ‘outside’ beyond a cultural filter, allowing us to regain a ‘savage’ or ‘innocent’ eye, a pristine visual experience unmediated by the partial perspective implied by the very term ‘scopic’” (Jay 2011: 62). Nevertheless, if there was no way out of the period visual regime or iconosphere in which we are enclosed, then it would be simply impossible to argue for a plurality of different spheres or, even worse, to have a cognitive access to their “otherness”. In other words, we are not in the condition to make comparisons, or to describe, analyze and interpret historically or culturally unfamiliar spheres. If we can see the world – included the world of the past – in the only way available to us, then we are left with only two optional conclusions, either there is but one single iconosphere, namely our own, or every period eye is able to look “outside” and “beyond”.

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